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LETTERS
to the EDITOR

WATER EFFICIENCY CASE STUDY: California-Friendly Landscape

By Tom Crain
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SAVE TO
MYLL

Mother and daughter Carolyn and Melissa Bilger fit The Yard Fairy's customer profile like a gardener's glove – upper level income, highly-educated women in their 40s to 60s yearning for an eco-friendly, low-maintenance landscape for their new home.

The Bilgers, residing in a new development built on the gentle slopes of Escondido, 30 miles northeast of San Diego, enjoy a panoramic view of the Palomar Mountains. They have a larger-than-average 10,000 square foot (¼ acre) yard of poor-grade soil of clay and decomposed granite. They inherited an unplanted yard except for some drought-resistant, low-maintenance plants stabilizing the property's edges.

This landscaping project was to be the exterior fulfillment of the Bilgers "greening" efforts underway within their home of cork flooring and low-VOC (volatile organic compounds) interior paints and finishes. Their goal was to own a water-efficient yard incorporating as many 'rain water harvesting' techniques as possible into the design. Since they didn't know very much about how to tend gardens, they knew they wanted them to be strictly low-maintenance.

The Bilgers envisioned paths and walkways to encourage their daily exercise accented by garden spaces inspirational for enjoying the beautiful mountain views and providing interesting focal points visible from within their home. They preferred flowers that would attract butterflies, birds and other wildlife, and fruit trees that offered shade and fragrance. True cat lovers, the Bilgers also wanted the utility and plantings of their landscape to "stimulate" their three leashed felines trained to walk alongside them.

When the Bilgers went out to find the right landscape contractor for their dream project, they were surprised to find only two in the area were experienced with low-water landscape solutions.

"The Yard Fairy came in with the higher bid at \$60,000," Melissa says. "It didn't matter. We chose them for their careful listening to our goals and objectives, thoroughness in addressing our needs and creativity in providing solutions."

When The Yard Fairy makes bids, the costs are broken down into several categories: demolition and grading, irrigation and drainage, hardscape (such as patios and walkways) and soil preparation, followed by the costs of the plants themselves.

SLOW-DRIP, LOW-APPLICATION IRRIGATION.

After the bid was accepted, Downey got down to work using a hidden drip irrigation system delivering water directly to the roots of the plants protected from evaporation by mulch.

"First, we removed the standard spray heads located on the outside slopes at the back of the property," explains Downey. "We then replaced them with rotating sprinkler heads that deliver water at a highly-uniform, low-application rate. Multi-stream, multi-trajectory rotating sprinklers were also used in the thyme lawn alternative area out front."

Downey used pressure-regulating half-inch drip irrigation for all other planter areas for a low-volume delivery of moisture directly to the plants roots. Protected by mulch, the generated moisture is much less likely to evaporate.

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The Yard Fairy built patio areas and walkways with a combination of interlocking pavers and stabilized decomposed granite instead of concrete, allowing rainwater to seep into the soil instead of running off into the sewer system.

The Bilgers back room had a western exposure that got extremely hot on most summer afternoons. For a solution, The Yard Fairy provided passive solar cooling by planting shade trees and adding sun-protective structures. When in full leaf in summer, the deciduous Crape myrtles and African sumacs cool the home, and at other times of the year, add seasonal interest. Wooden awnings are strategically placed to block the high summer sun but allow the low winter sun in. Wall-mounted pergolas accommodate shading vines.

The Yard Fairy created three distinct planter beds. By grouping the water-thirsty plants, including roses, daylilies and lobelia, in the 'cutting' garden off the master bedroom, she was able to maximize water efficiency. The rest of the plants were drawn from the state-sanctioned 'Nifty Fifty' list of drought-tolerant "California-friendly" plants using 40 percent less water – many fire-resistant – including Cistus rock roses, lavender and California lilac.

In a private corner of the yard overlooked by Melissa Bilger's home office, The Yard Fairy created a small Zen garden – a spiral of low-growing elfin thyme and river rock. This peaceful and meditative scene gives the Bilgers a much-appreciated calming view.

In the back of the home, a circular patio garden is planted with a mix of native plants offering a beautiful year-round display of blooms and foliage. The side garden contains Mediterranean plants mixed with fruit trees. Hummingbird-attracting succulents surround a dry stream bed that edges the patio at the back of the house providing a soothing vista to sit and view the landscape. The end of the stream bed is marked with a colorful overflowing urn that recirculates undulating water.

OVERFLOWING WITH RESULTS.

"When we first moved in to our home, we used about 10,000 gallons of water a month," says Melissa Bilger. "Soon after the new irrigation system went in, we were using only 7,000 gallons a month. We only expected to break even on our water usage." The Bilgers also save on less maintenance visits: quarterly vs. weekly at their previous residences surrounded by traditional yardscapes.

"We receive regular compliments from our homebuilder and neighbors, some of whom are making plans for their own, water-friendly landscapes," says Carolyn Bilger. They recently became a District Winner of the California-Friendly Landscape Contest operated by the Metropolitan Water District and recipients of the California Landscape Contractors Association Beautification Award.

Melissa has learned how to regulate the irrigation system requiring a few adjustments in the nine months since the system has been up-and-running. The Bilgers want to wait on the installation of a smart irrigation system until the vegetation in their yard matures. Downey believes irrigation systems, like the one installed for the Bilgers, should last for at least five years before any major repair work is necessary. But she suggests every system should be checked at least quarterly for sprinkler head alignment or damage.

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